

MFA Opens the Paul Revere, Sam Adams Time Capsule

By Shannon McMahon

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The second historic Boston time capsule to emerge in months, a Revere-era bundle discovered in a cornerstone of the Massachusetts State House on December 11, was revealed to the public during a Tuesday press conference at the Museum of Fine Arts.

Artifacts conservator Pam Hatchfield unpacked the 5.5 by 7.5 inch brass box alongside Massachusetts Archive and Commonwealth Museum executive director Michael Comeau, revealing two dozen centuries-old coins and a medal depicting George Washington, a silver plate marking the day the capsule was placed, a paper impression of the seal of the Commonwealth, a title page from the Massachusetts Colony Records, and the front pages of five folded newspapers.

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The dismantling of the heavy box, which was only one inch deep, was done in the Art of Americas wing of the museum, in front of the likenesses of two of the country's founding fathers. A massive George Washington painting—Thomas Sully's 'The Passage of the Delaware— and a portrait of John Adams looked on. Nearby sat silver pieces smithed by Paul Revere, who placed the capsule with then-Governor Samuel Adams and Colonel William Scollay in 1795.

"It really is amazing, the quality of the paper" Hatchfield told a room of reporters, at the front of which Governor Deval Patrick and Secretary William Galvin sat. She carefully pried up one of several layers of newspaper from the box with a dental tool, which she said is her favorite, along with the porcupine quill she likes to use. The crowd chuckled at her mention of the unexpected tools.

"Don't make me laugh," she said, her brows furrowed behind a head-strapped magnifying lens. "God that is tight."



Newspapers from a time capsule.
Jessica Rinaldi/ The Boston Globe

The box was densely packed, and some of its items were not in as perfect condition as that newspaper. Many coins, for example, had newsprint stuck to them after being pressed into the paper for 219 years. Hatchfield did not unfold the publications, as paper conservationists will have to later address their condition and whether they could be unfolded. The conservators said two of the papers appeared to be "The Boston Daily" and "The Boston Traveller."



Pam Hatchfield and Michael Comeau opened the time capsule.
Jessica Rinaldi/ The Boston Globe

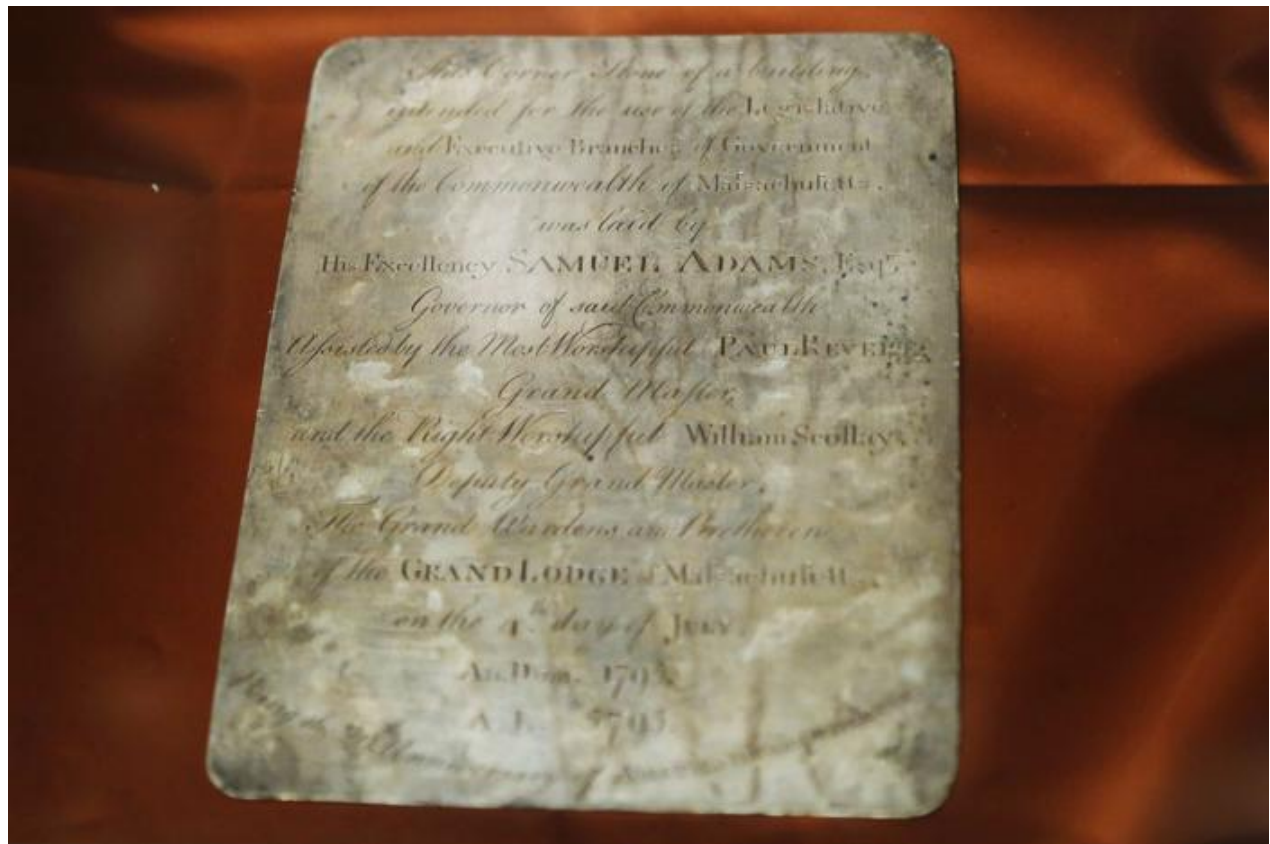
The first items to come out of the capsule were from 1855, as officials who came across it that year added newspapers and coins to its original contents before placing it back in its original spot. After retrieving the newspapers and coins dated 1855, Hatchfield uncovered the Revere-era items, which included an extremely valuable 1652 pine tree shilling, among other coins, and a silver plate marking the day the box was buried.

"July 4, 1795, the 20th anniversary of America's independence," Hatchfield said after reading the plate.

"How cool," Comeau chimed in.

The conservators said the box, which was originally thought to be copper, is actually brass. Glass covers were immediately placed over the contents as they were removed. Some of the coins were very corroded, while others were washed enough before their placement that they looked shiny and new. Hatchfield said the silver plate, the last piece to be retrieved, even had

fingerprints on it.



An engraved silver plate removed from the time capsule.
Brian Snyder/Reuters

Secretary Galvin, who is the chairman of the Massachusetts historical commission and oversaw the capsule removal, told the room that the historical unveiling was appropriately taking place in one of the most historic galleries in the country.

"These symbols, I believe, represent the aspirations of our founding fathers and those who came after," he said before the event.

The capsule was placed in a cornerstone of the State House when it was being built. X-rays showed that the documents, coins, newspapers, and metal plate were inside. However, conservators were worried about the condition of the contents, as Galvin had said records indicated that water leaks had been an ongoing problem near where the capsule was discovered.



Coins, including a copper medal depicting George Washington (lower L), sit in an archival box after being removed from the time capsule.

Brian Snyder/Reuters

The 10 pound copper box was discovered during maintenance almost a month ago, and was unearthed by Hatchfield. She spent seven hours chiseling away at the stone that encased it that day, spilling old coins from the stone before the box was freed. Officials say the copper box replaced the capsules original container— a leather pouch— when it was discovered and reburied in 1855. The coins that fell from the stone during removal are suspected to have been thrown atop the capsule when it was reburied, as an act of good luck.



The unopened time capsule.
Brian Snyder/ REUTERS

Another time capsule dating back to 1901 was discovered atop Boston's Old State House this October. The box, which contained photographs, newspaper clippings, and a book, was found in the head of the historic building's golden lion statue when it was removed for cleaning. That capsule was again placed inside the lions head, this time containing an iPhone 5, letters from journalists covering the event (including one from Boston.com) and the latest edition of the same book found in the 113-year-old capsule.



Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick (L) and conservator Pam Hatchfield look at artifacts removed from the new time capsule.

Brian Snyder/Reuters

Hatchfield has worked in Egypt on digs preserving thousands of years of history, but called the capsule discovery the most exciting conservation effort she has participated in. Governor Patrick and Secretary Galvin said they haven't decided yet whether more items will be added to the time capsule before it is once again placed in its original spot.

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